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Libraries Interact – a personal view of practical 2.0

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Abstract

Libraries Interact is a group blog established in 2006 to focus on topics of interest to Australian libraries and their friends. After 18 months the blog is still going strongly with a core membership of librarians spread around Australia who rarely meet in person and over 300 posts on topics covering all library sectors.

This presentation will look at the practical ways that web 2.0 tools and services are employed by the core group of contributors to Libraries Interact. These include: Google Groups, Peanut Butter wiki, Wordpress, Frappr and others.

Introduction

Towards the middle of 2006 I was pleasantly surprised to receive an email from a librarian in Western Australia inviting me to join a small group of blogging librarians to create a group blog for the Australian library community. The idea was that this group blog would provide a mechanism to promote discussion of topics within the Australian library community. There were already some discussion lists offering this, but they were typically limited either by design, or lack of promotion, to professional associations and groups and institutional members. Libraries Interact [[HREF 1](#)] was to be an open blog that anyone, (not just librarians) in the world could read,

contribute to and comment on - so long as it was of interest to the Australian library community.

I first started blogging in early 2005, more as an experiment and personal learning activity rather than an effort to communicate with an audience, but it has proved to be an excellent medium for communicating with a modestly sized, yet significant audience. My personal blog is still focussed very much on my personal learnings that I'm happy to share with others, but Libraries Interact has a definite online community feel to it.

Almost from the very beginning, the members of the group adopted the name Thali to refer to ourselves. The name comes from the Indian practice of serving a selection of different dishes on a segmented plate - we wanted to offer a selection of different points of view that would be of interest widely across the library and information science sector. And because librarians like to have a few acronyms under their belts - it also stands for 'this helps Australian libraries interact'. So, how does the Thali use collaborative web services to keep the show going? By experimenting with different web 2.0 services, selecting the ones that are appropriate to our needs and using them effectively. The following sections will describe some of the services we have tried and how effective (or not) they were.

Wordpress

WordPress [[HREF2](#)] is the most important tool that underpins Libraries Interact. It is the blog engine. WordPress is an open source application designed specifically for blogging and there has been substantial and ongoing development by the WP community. In addition to the base application, developers are writing creative, innovative plugins to enhance the application, making it a very versatile product. Because we have our own

installation we have the added flexibility of deciding which plugins we want to use. If we used the free WordPress hosted sites like WordPress.com [[HREF 3](#)] and Edublogs [[HREF 4](#)] we would have a much more limited selection. A plugin is also used to help us manage spam commenting.

Some WP blogs do not look like blogs at all, they look like commercial websites, online dictionaries, e-books and photo galleries, thanks to plugins that provide features like a-z indexes and a vast array of free templates to change the design. WordPress has also become *widgetised* making it even easier to add useful features to the sidebar. Widgets are small snippets of code used to embed content or tools from other sites.

WordPress can be used at a variety of hosting sites, but for Libraries Interact we host it using Bluehost [[HREF 5](#)]. Bluehost and many other hosting services provide WordPress as a ready-to-install option. As someone who is a regular and frequent user of Blogger [[HREF 6](#)] I'm able to compare the two blog engines. While they both have different terminology in their user interfaces, the experiences are very similar in terms of composing and posting content and in administration. One of the standout features of WordPress is the option to create static pages. We have used these on Libraries Interact to provide pages for information about the blog, how to contribute and for our list of Australian library blogs.

The ability to manage permissions for multiple users has enabled us to open up Libraries Interact to anyone who wants to contribute articles. The approval process means that we can screen out spam-like posts and those which are clearly not of relevance to the community of readers. Would-be contributors can register themselves on the site.

WordPress has proved itself as an effective blog engine for our needs and at no time have we had any suggestions that we need to use something

different. The ongoing development of plugins makes it a highly agile blogging platform that can be adapted to suit various needs.

Google Groups

While WordPress is our most important tool, the Thali has come to appreciate Google Groups [[HREF 7](#)] as a valuable method of communication. The Thali is made up of busy individuals in different time zones and it is highly unlikely that we are ever all available to "meet" in the virtual world at once. Using Google Groups gives us a mechanism to have an asynchronous conversation about a wide variety of topics. We use it to discuss the management of Libraries Interact itself, but we also use it to bounce ideas of each other on professional matters, and to collaborate on research, projects and conference presentations. Several members of the Thali have used it to collaborate on a conference paper. Those of us not writing the paper were able to chip in an idea or two or provide feedback when requested via Google Groups.

It is also an archive of our correspondence in one place which is useful when researching what decisions were made when and why. We do not have meetings and minutes to refer to. Most recently we have been using Google Groups to discuss the new template we are launching and other possible changes to layout and features of the blog. Its other chief advantage is that everyone in the group can follow the threads of discussions which would have been challenging if relying on email alone.

Peanut Butter Wiki

Peanut butter wiki [[HREF 8](#)] is another of the tools we have used since the very beginning of Libraries Interact. The wiki is our repository of decisions-made, policies and design ideas. We have used this to write task lists and keep track of who is supposed to be doing what. Twice it has been used for

us to "vote" on particular topics. Most recently we set up a table for us to rank a short list of new themes. Each person ranked them in order and identified what features of the themes we thought needed tweaking. From this we were able to evaluate and select a theme and at the same time record a list of modifications that were needed. These included changes to background colours, widgets to be added to the sidebar,

We have not made much use of the commenting feature. I expected that this would be something useful, especially when we were working through policies and design ideas. But, as it turned out Google Groups became the place to discuss those kinds of issues. Perhaps this was because most of our other discussions were taking place in that forum, rather than because the feature was not adequate on the wiki. I would have preferred to have the commenting used more in the wiki as the discussions would have been linked directly to the content on the wiki page.

Once Libraries Interact had been operational for a few months, two new people were invited to become members of the Thali and administrators of Libraries Interact. We were able to refer them to the wiki to help them get some background on what was happening with the blog and how we operated. I hope they found it useful as an induction tool.

PBwiki was selected simply because I was familiar with it and offered to set up a wiki in the early days. At that stage we had not settled on a name for the blog so we were trashing out combinations of Australia, blog and library. It resulted in our wiki being called 'ozliblog' for convenience sake. Our needs were quite simple, we wanted a place to record things and that we could make private. PBwiki fitted the bill. Since then, it has seen some added features and has become even more user-friendly with the wysiwig editor being improved and now a range of ready-to-use plugins have been incorporated to make it very simple for users to embed other content. An example is the plugin which requires only a YouTube [[HREF 9](#)] URL to be

pasted in to have a video embedded on the page. The wiki has proved itself essential time again as we have had to go back and recode various sections. Having saved copies of code or instructions on how we did things has been invaluable.

| Selection of theme | | | | | |
|--|-----------------|---|---|---|--|
| Number across your row in your order of preference. 1 is your favourite. Underneath the voting rows insert any tweaks required for the theme. You might want to put the niggles down first and that might help work out your order of preference. | | | | | |
| Theme | AVIRB | GLORIOUS FUTURE | MOO POINT | SKITTLISH | VERTIGO BLUE |
| Peta | 5 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Cory | | | | | |
| Kathryn | 5 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Snail | | | | | |
| Fiona | 5 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Con | 5 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Michelle | 5 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| TOTAL - lowest is the favourite | 25 | 16 | 14 | 7 | 13 |
| Niggles | Just plain ugly | Profile pictures to be removed - but still need to show who the author is, and a link to all the author's posts. Profile pictures also appear in search results and category lists. | Too white - background colour to reduce the glare, colour scheme generally - brown headings and links could be improved | <p>Add link to authors' posts - <code><?php the_author_posts_link();?></code> added on dev to <code>index.php</code> and <code>single.php</code> - done</p> <p>Couldn't see the list of authors so I've implemented a widget to list all of the authors. (techplorer)</p> <p>I didn't add a list, I just enabled a link where the authors' names appear in each blog post. I quite like featuring all our contributors - it might encourage others - but it takes up a lot of space!!</p> | Requires work with images to change title. |
| More Niggles | | The blockquotes show inverted commas (image), i'd prefer to just type that in myself and just have the blockquote indented | Font seems a little large | <p>Subtitle is not obvious - added to <code>header.php</code> but <code>css</code> needs to be looked at to make it stand out - <code><?php bloginfo('description');?></code> Subtitle now added</p> | Too white - glary |
| | | | Styling for <code><div></code> tags could be improved - currently has yellow highlighting | <p>Might want to suppress the time of posting (posts and comments)? Some of our contributors might prefer not to show they were blog reading/commenting during work hours - or is this too paranoid Can be done, however nearly every file of the theme needs to be adjusted. Is this something we really want to do?</p> <p>Nah - let's leave it as is.</p> | |
| | | | Just a bit too plain. | <p>Check if the openID login works (commenting) or requires anything else to be done to enable it.</p> <p>I've disabled the plugins that came with the theme, if we want to do this, not sure we do, we can look at implementing it independently of the theme</p> <p>Agreed - leave for now.</p> | |
| | | | | I have a problem with high contrast pages - the background bright colour "beats" when I look at it. Would be good to make the main | |

Figure 1 : PBwiki used to choose a new theme

Google Custom Search Engine (CSE)

Libraries Interact offers a page listing Australian library blogs. Initially we just listed them. But we were thinking of ways that we could feature these blogs in a better way. Being able to search across all of the blogs at once was one idea we came up with, and Google came up with a way for us to achieve that. Google custom search engines [[HREF 10](#)] allow the creator to specify

which domains will be searched. It also enables embedding of the search results on our site and to customise the results so that the colours will harmonise or blend in on the page.

Our Google Custom Search has three Thali members who can add new blogs to the list. So we can share the work around. Because we are a non-profit site, Google also allows us to turn off advertisements.

Creating a Google CSE is relatively straightforward and it is fairly easy to customise the colours. The difficulty that we have run into has been when embedding the search results in Libraries Interact. If we are editing the page in the wysiwig editor some parts of the code are stripped out when the page is saved. To work around this, we have to edit the Australian library blog page in html view. There have been a few times now where this has been forgotten and the search functionality does not work at all, until we have reinserted to code in the correct mode.

A custom search engine is not something that every blog needs, but it has added another dimension to our simple WordPress blog.

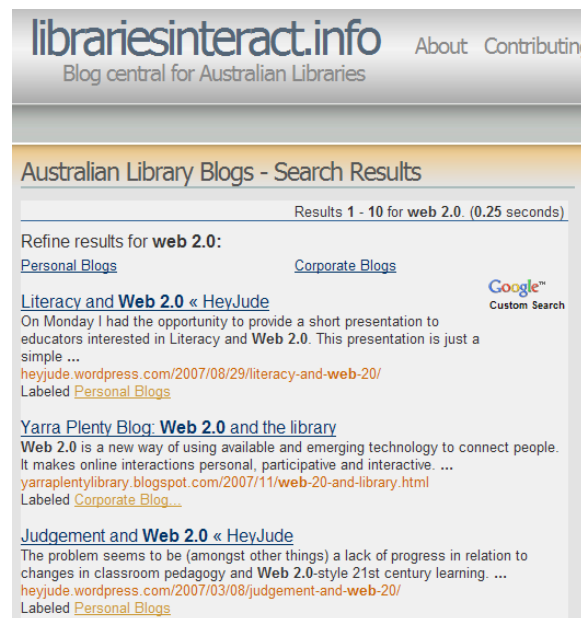


Figure 2: Google Custom Search results embedded in page

Instant Messaging & Meebo

Instant messaging has not really become a mainstream communication method for running Libraries Interact. It is used occasionally between individuals, and although we set up a Meebo [[HREF 11](#)] chat room the group does not have meetings there. With our members spread across different time zones it can be challenging to find a time when most of us will be available.

Frappr

Frappr [[HREF 12](#)] is a social map site that allows users to set up group maps. Individuals are able to place a 'pin' on the map showing their location, attach a photo or avatar and add a short message or 'shout out'. A Libraries Interact map was started quite early on in the blog's life and was embedded in the sidebar to provide some visual interest. It was located in a section that was used to feature other messages from the Thali at appropriate times. During Library Week, the space was used for an image of a crystal ball and readers were asked to submit their visions of the future. On the first anniversary of the blog a birthday cake appeared in the space and cupcakes were there when we celebrated breaking through the Technorati [[HREF13](#)] 100,000 ranking. The rest of the time the space shows the map and readers are invited to join.

I have found this map a real motivator when it comes to writing posts. It is easier to feel connected with readers who take the time to put a pin on the map and tell us who they are, especially when they add a message as well, rather than readers who are just represented by a little Feedburner [[HREF 14](#)] badge that counts the numbers of readers. It is difficult to tell if they are

really people, or just subscriptions to the feed that may represent people, or applications syndicating the content.

The map has been modified to squeeze into the sidebar. The full size map looks much better and it is likely that in our new theme we will feature the map on a separate page. Another problem encountered with Frappr is that email notifications about new pins does not work - sometimes people have to wait a while for their pin to be approved. Without an approval process the map is filled with spam pins.



Figure 3: Libraries Interact readers on the Frappr map

Really Simple Syndication (RSS) tools

It is important to manage your feeds if you are serious about maintaining readership and promoting your blog. For many readers, the feed is the chief method of accessing content from a blog, and they will only rarely visit the site. Libraries Interact uses the following services to publicize and manage ownership of our feeds.

Feedburner

Feedburner takes the native feed from a blog and republishes it to make it compatible with as many feed reading applications as possible and with optional enhancements. For example, it is possible using 'feed flares' to add extra links into the content for each post to include links to creative commons licence information, or one-click add to social bookmarking sites, or 'email this' buttons. By making it easy for others to link to a blog, the blog can be publicized very widely. Feedburner also makes it easy to create an animated badge for a website or email signature file to showcase recent posts on a blog. Some of the Thali members have embedded these kinds of badges on their personal website to help encourage readership of Libraries Interact. Feedburner also offers statistics on the use of the feed and optionally on the use of the site, including traffic, popular posts and subscriber data. If Feedburner is used it is wise to modify autodiscovery links in blog templates to hide the native feeds from browsers. This directs all traffic to the feed you are controlling in Feedburner to give you a more accurate measure of its use.

Bloglines

While Bloglines [[HREF 15](#)] is well known as a feed aggregator, it has a useful facility for blog publishers to establish ownership of feeds. In the early days

we had exposed a number of feeds and wanted to consolidate them as much as possible. By claiming the various feeds and nominating one as the authoritative feed, Bloglines subscribers were directed to the feed we wanted them to use.

Technorati

Like Bloglines, establish ownership of feeds in Technorati helps to consolidate traffic to the feed you want to use. Technorati is a blog indexing service. Blog owners can claim their blog and its feeds, describe their blog and provide information about themselves. Technorati keeps track of linking between blogs and uses this data to indicate their success relative to other blogs. In the very early days of Libraries Interact the Thali was fairly excited when it broke through the Technorati 100000 ranking. At that stage there was some confusion generally about what the Technorati ranking meant. It did not mean that our blog was in the top 100000 blogs, but nevertheless it was significant to us in terms of achieving some exposure and having other bloggers link to our post. We pay less attention now to what is happening in Technorati because I believe our focus is now on our community of readers and their comments and feedback. But it was a worthwhile exercise to focus our attention on building readership in the early days.

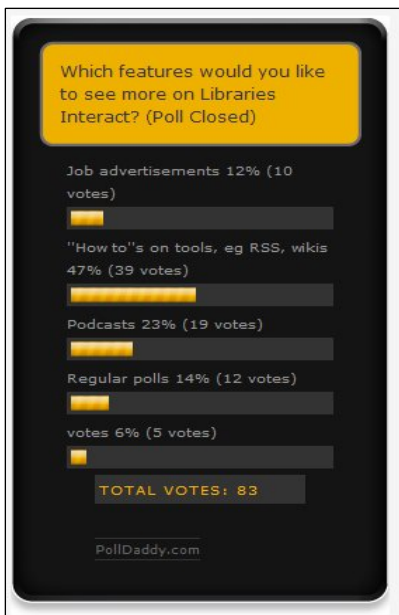
Facebook

There is very little news to report on our activities in Facebook [[HREF 16](#)] as yet. A group, [Friends and Readers of Libraries Interact](#), was established recently and attracted a few members, but there has not been a lot of action in that forum. Readers are most welcome to join and make of it what they will. Thali members would certainly be interested to have feedback from discussions in that forum, especially as to content and presentation of the

blog.

Poll Daddy

Although Libraries Interact is open to almost anybody to contribute, there are only a handful of other contributors outside of the Thali and many of them have only written once or twice. At times, the Thali needs some inspiration as to new content for the site. Poll Daddy [[HREF 17](#)] was used to gather feedback from readers on content they would like to read. It was a simple one question poll where readers were asked to nominate from a short list what types of content they would like to see more of. After submitting their



response they were shown the outcomes of the poll. The results were used to generate a series of 'how to' posts that attracted some positive feedback by way of comments.

There is a WordPress plugin for managing polls and it is likely that we would try this next time, but we found Poll Daddy to be an easy service to use. The poll was set up on the Poll Daddy site and a code snippet was provided to embed the poll on our site.

Figure 4 : Poll Daddy widget

Conclusion

Rob Paterson (2008) likens "Twittering" to grooming in a recent blog post at The FASTforward blog. He contends that as primates we humans need "grooming" as a social lubricant and that services like Twitter [[HREF 18](#)] and

other social media that let us give a quick greeting, message or status update to our colleagues facilitate us interacting without the benefit of face time. Some of the Thali are twitterers, some/most of us use social networking sites like Facebook and Ning [[HREF 19](#)]. Maybe this helps us work as a team even though we only see each other at the occasional conference. Not once has the entire group met in person.



Figure 5: Grooming [dsc_7150-monkeys.jpg](#) by swh.
Used under a [Creative Commons licence](#).

It is possible to run a communication website very cheaply, even when participants are geographically remote. Apart from our time and the cost of the hosting service there has been no other outlay. Providing that participants are fairly amenable to working in a group and prepared to put in some time and experiment with freely available web 2.0 tools, the "business" needs of running such a site can be met.

Members contribute what they can in terms of their skills and time. Fortunately we have one member who seems happy to look after our technical requirements in terms of WordPress upgrades and modifications for our special needs. Others write more, do more research, or provide feedback and consultation on questions that arise.

Working in a group like the Thali gives an individual a new view on things. We can tend to be locked into our workplace's world view, but working virtually with colleagues from different sectors and different states brings a fresh outlook on things and informs about what the local issues are around the country. It has also provided a professional support network that gives us an external perspective on our own workplaces.

References

Paterson, Rob (2008) **Grooming and Social Software**, *The FASTforward blog* (accessed January 14th 2008),
<http://www.fastforwardblog.com/2008/01/12/grooming-and-social-software/>

Links

[HREF 1] Libraries Interact – <http://librariesinteract.info>

[HREF 2] WordPress – <http://www.wordpress.org/>

[HREF 3] WordPress.com – <http://www.wordpress.com>

[HREF 4] Edublogs – <http://www.edublogs.org>

[HREF 5] Bluehost – <http://www.bluehost.com>

[HREF 6] Blogger – <http://www.blogger.com>

[HREF 7] Google Groups – <http://groups.google.com/>

[HREF 8] Peanut Butter Wiki – <http://pbwiki.com/>

[HREF 9] Youtube – <http://www.youtube.com>

[HREF 10] Google Custom Search Engine – <http://www.google.com/coop/>

[HREF 11] Meebo – <http://www.meebo.com/>

[HREF 12] Frappr – <http://www.frappr.com/>

[HREF 13] Technorati – <http://www.technorati.com/>

[HREF 14] Feedburner - <http://www.feedburner.com/>

[HREF 15] Bloglines - <http://www.bloglines.com/>

[HREF 16] Facebook - <http://www.facebook.com/>

[HREF 17] Poll Daddy - <http://www.polldaddy.com/>

[HREF 18] Twitter - <http://www.twitter.com/>

[HREF 19] Ning - <http://www.ning.com>